

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE C-16NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
17 June 1985

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Everybody's playing 'I've Got a Secret'

By LEWIS H. LAPHAM

FOLLOWING THE allegations that a family of espionage agents had been selling secrets to the Soviet Union for 18 years, almost everybody in Washington who claims to be anybody released thunderous statements about the need to get a firmer grip on the national security. Caspar Weinberger, the secretary of defense, even has called for the execution of those found guilty of spying during peacetime.

The official alarm strikes me as excessive, and I suspect that the military secret has become as obsolete a weapon as the crossbow. Consider the tonnage of secrets lugged across international frontiers during the last 40 years. Legions of agents working two or three sides of every rumor have copied, collated and sold enough information to fill the Library of Congress.

And what has been the result of this immense labor? How has the exchange of classified news impinged, even slightly, on the course of events? When pressed by questions they would rather not answer, the gentlemen in Washington invariably make some kind of specious case for the incalculable significance of a particular scrap of paper.

But the knowledge of what secret could have prevented the United States from blundering into Vietnam? The

makers of policy for both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations already knew what they thought, and no amount of contrary evidence could have dissuaded them from embracing the beauty of their geopolitical romance.

The acquisition or loss of what secret could prevent the U.S. from building its arsenal of nuclear weapons as necessary to the American economy as to the American theory of reality? What perfect secrets could have rescued the Shah of Iran or changed Nicaragua into a democratic suburb of Los Angeles? Assume that the Soviet Union could track every American submarine or that the U.S. could decipher the launch codes of every missile in Siberia. What then? Somebody still has to decide to touch a match to the nuclear fire.

The history of the world's wars suggests that the fateful decisions have little or nothing to do with facts, whether overt or covert. They arise instead from passionate illusions, from dreams and the fear of the dark.

When presented with the discovery of suspected spies, the national media (as enthralled by their love of secrets as any secretary of defense) broadcast

melodramatic reports of their exploits, outfitting even the least among them with vast and mysterious powers. Together with the buyers and sellers of secrets, the media like to say that governments without perfect knowledge of other governments take actions that otherwise they might not have taken—with far-reaching consequences.

Only people fool enough to play at being gods imagine that they can obtain an impregnable state of omniscience. Malcolm Muggeridge made the point in his memoirs, with reference to his employment during World War II with the British secret service: "Secrecy is as essential to intelligence as vestments and incense to a Mass, as darkness to a spiritualist seance, and must at all costs be preserved, whether or not it serves any purpose... With old hands, it becomes second nature to communicate in codes and to use an accommodation address for perfectly innocuous communications; to prefer a cache in a potting shed to a normal letter box and a diplomatic bag to a suitcase for carrying blameless personal effects."

John Walker appears to have operated under the cover of an analogous fantasy. Authorities say he was fond of disguises, carried a sword-cane, styled himself with a code name, "Jaws," and thought himself engaged in "damn glamorous work." During the period of his reputed service for the KGB, Walker belonged to the John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan. All three organizations place as much emphasis on secrecy as do Weinberger and the curators of the Pentagon who believe that, by administering lie detector tests and limiting security clearances to a mere 2 million people, they can lock the vagaries of human nature safely in a file cabinet.

OF THE 19,607,736 new documents that the federal government last year classified as secret, it's probably safe to assume the majority were granted this status for one of two reasons: to conceal stupidity, irrelevance or chicanery from the embarrassment of disclosure to the public; or to make the documents more precious, perhaps sacred, thus adding to the store of religious amulets with which to ward off the corruption of the unclassified world and the malevolence of the evil eye set in the head of an evil empire.

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